

Appln. No.: 09/728,152
Amdt. Dated June 17, 2005
Reply to Office Action dated March 24, 2005

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (currently amended) A method of generating and processing billing and payment information utilizing computing units connected to a network for a service provided cooperatively by multiple tiers, the method comprising the steps of:
 - collecting by a first computer unit usage information of the service by a customer from one of a first tier of the multiple tiers or a third party;
 - integrating by a second computer unit usage information with customer profile information of the customer provided by a second tier of the multiple tiers;
 - generating by a third computer unit billing information based on the usage information, the customer profile information, and rate information for the service; and
 - transmitting by a fourth computer unit a bill based on the billing information to the customer.
2. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, wherein the first computer unit collects the usage information from the first tier that includes a distributor of the service that is different from a generator or a provider of the service.
3. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, wherein the second computer unit integrates the [the step of integrating] usage information [includes using]with customer profile information provided by [the second tier that includes] one of a generator, a distributor, or a provider of the service .

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4. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, wherein the third computer unit generates [step of generating] billing information [includes] using rate information from [at least] one of a generator, a distributor, or a provider of the service.

5. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, wherein the fourth computer unit generates and transmits [step of transmitting] the bill to the customer [includes generating and mailing a paper bill to the customer] in the form of a paper mailing.

6. (original) The method according to claim 5, wherein the step of transmitting the bill to the customer includes the steps of:

printing the bill at an optimal mailing location based on address information of the customer; and

mailing the bill from the optimal mailing location.

7. (original) The method according to claim 6, wherein the optimal mailing location is determined based on at least one of a zip-code of the customer, a transportation cost, an environmental impact, or a mailing capacity of a mail distribution center.

8. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

processing by a fifth computer unit payment information received from the customer; and

allocating by a sixth computer unit payments, based on the payment information, to pay service providers at the multiple tiers from the payment information received from the customer.

9. (original) The method according to claim 8, wherein the step of allocating payments includes allocating payments to one or more of a generator, a distributor, or a provider of the service.

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10. (original) The method according to claim 1, wherein the service includes utility service.

11. (original) The method according to claim 10, wherein the utility service includes one of power, water, gas, cable television, telephone, internet, or satellite television services.

12. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, wherein the [step of transmitting the bill to the customer includes]fourth computer unit transmits the billing information for electronic bill presentment to the customer using a public or private electronic network.

13. (original) The method according to claim 12, wherein the public electronic network includes the Internet.

14. (original) The method according to claim 1, wherein the step of transmitting the bill to the customer includes providing the billing information to a third party bill payment service.

15. (original) The method according to claim 8, wherein the step of processing payment information includes using a third party authentication or verification service.

16. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, further comprising [the step of performing]a seventh computer unit that is programmed to perform data mining using the usage information and the customer profile information.

17. (original) The method according to claim 8, further comprising the step of performing data mining using the usage information, the customer profile information and the payment information.

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18. (original) The method according to claim 17, further comprising the step of using results of the data mining step to determine which additional services to offer to the customer.

19. (currently amended) The method according to claim 1, wherein the step of collecting usage information includes receiving by the first computer unit a direct feed of raw data from a metering company.

20. to 40. Withdrawn.